Love Story
John 15:5-7, Psalms 36
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Boy meets girl. Boy and girl fall in love. Boy's parents object. Boy marries girl anyhow. Girl dies. That's the skeletal outline of a literary and cinema phenomenon under the simplest of titles, "Love Story". What's not so simple, of course, is the public response to both book and movie. I would guess a lot of you either read or saw it. I would guess that a lot of you were deeply moved by it and that it tugged at something deep inside that you had forgotten. That's what happened all across the country - people wept openly at a simple, touching story, overly romantic, overly simple - but I know that as I observed the crowd leaving the theatre, I could sense that they had just experienced a range of emotions that are not ordinarily exposed in public, if at all.

Let me review the story. The setting is Harvard and Radcliffe. Oliver Barrett, IV, the heir apparent of a very wealthy family, meets Jennifer Cavilleri, daughter of a widowed baker; brilliant and arty. The courtship period is honest with both having to deal with this tremendous social gap between them. Somehow they fall in love and it's an honest, gritty, sometimes tender, sometimes funny kind of love. When Oliver takes Jenny home to meet the folks she is overwhelmed but proud. Oliver's parents are proud but unimpressed. And at this point Oliver's relationship with his father which has always been cold and distant - comes apart at the seams.

Their wedding is simple, conducted by a Unitarian minister with no mention of God, and the practical effect of the marriage is to make them totally dependent on each other, for Oliver cannot get a law school scholarship because of his family's obvious wealth, and his father will no longer pay the bill because of the marriage. They scrimp and save and do the things a lot of married students have to do to survive, existing primarily on their love for each other. At one point they have a major falling out, a near catastrophe, and in the process of reconciliation Jenny says to Oliver what is perhaps the best and worst line

of the whole book, "Love means not ever having to say you're sorry." With graduation things begin to look better. Oliver has done very well academically, lands a good job, and they begin a new life with an open, glorious future ahead of them. But then a trip to the doctor to discover why Jenny is not conceiving a child reveals that she has cancer and will not live much longer. Here the author is at his best as he shows how tragedy affects each character in the story. Oliver and Jenny face it, finally, together, with her refusing to give in to regret or tears. At her death Oliver rushes out the door of the hospital and meets his father, who until this time, has not known of the illness. In the movie the confrontation is brief. The father says "I'm sorry". Oliver says that sentence - "Love means never having to say you're sorry" and walks away. But in the book, having said that to his father, the author has him say, "And then I did what I had never done in his presence, much less in his arms. I cried."

Thus Hollywood once again has managed to miss the point. For it seems to me that if "Love Story" is serious literature - with something to say, it is precisely this: that love heals broken relationships: that love and death always have redeeming possibilities:: that the re is something about love that enables us to walk through the worst experiences life can hand to us, and survive as whole, healthy people with a future. That's what the book says as it concludes with Oliver - weeping in his father's arms. And that's what the movie avoids saying by concluding with Oliver sitting beside a pond, the very picture of isolation and despair. The book concludes on a note that has tremendous theological implications, a note of hope. The movie concludes sentimentally, on a note of aloneness, separation - literally hell.

That's truly sad. That's a kind of ultimate human tragedy. For if there is no redeeming significance to love and death: if there is nothing hopeful and permanent and saving about human love, we're in a very bad, and very depressing predicament. For a Christian "Love Story" is a sad story throughout, however, not just because of the schmaltzy conclusion. But because Oliver and

Jennifer share a love that has no source other than each other. The only depth to their relationship is the depth they can bring to it, and to watch the story unfold is to know intuitively that there's something wrong, something incomplete. There is no room for God at the wedding: that is the wedding seals a relationship between two people - that goes no further than their own life together. And as Jenny weakens near the end of her life - that is near the end of this "Love Story" the author has Oliver say: "I began to think about God.

I mean, the notion of a Supreme Being existing somewhere began to creep into my private thoughts. Not because I wanted to strike Him in the face, to punch Him out for what he was about to do to me - to Jenny, that is. No, the kind of religious thoughts I had were just the opposite. Like when I woke up in the morning and Jenny was there. Still there. I'm sorry, embarrassed even, but I hoped there was a God I could say thank you to. Thank you for letting me wake up and see Jennifer."

That, to me at least, is the saddest paragraph in "Love Story". No God to say thank you to. No God to question or strike out against. No God to walk with through the valley of death. No source of love - no giver of love - no enabler of love - nothing. Thus Erich Segal's "Love Story" leaves a couple of very serious questions hanging in mid air.

A basic Christian affirmation - one that we learned as children, but probably don't understand as adults is that God is Love. Think about that. God <u>is</u> Love. Not that all love is God; not that all the feelings we lump under the single word love are divinely inspired: but that God is Love: and that when we are somehow enabled to give and receive love - it is because God has given us that ability. In more and more weddings in this church I am asked to read some scripture and to deliver a brief meditation. And try as I might to say something different each time I keep returning to this idea: the ability to love another person: the ability to be loved - to receive the love of another person - is God's most precious gift. It's not something that we construct

ourselves: it does not originate with us: it is not something which is a natural part of all of God's creatures. Rather it is his gift to his children, a precious gift to be treasured and celebrated and used with greatest care.

God is love. That's an idea that goes clear back to those early years when the Israelites were hammering out their faith on the forge of history. The Psalm I read to you this morning says it beautifully: "Lord, your constant love reaches the heavens . . . How presious, God, is your constant love. Men find protection under the shadow of your wings. They feast on the ab undant food from your house; You give them to drink from the river of goodness. You are the source of life, and because of your light we see the light."

The love of God for men is a major Biblical theme. It comes to a fulfillment in the New Testament in John's affirmation: "God so loved the world that he gave his only son." And it is amplified by the early Christians as they came to understand that men love each other, perfectly, creatively, redemptively, when their love is really a response to the love of God poured into their hearts. That is, the early Christians asserted that we can love completely, only out of a personal experience of God's love for us. Thus the Epistle can say, "We love because he first loved us." Christian love - the kind of love God wills that we give and receive, then, is always a responsive love: it is ignited within us by our awareness of a greater love. And that is the ultimate tragedy of Oliver Barret IV, and the ultimate sadness of love story, and the ultimate emptiness of a lot of everyday loving. There is not God to thank for it. And no God to give it. And no God to enable us to experience it.

God is love. That's a theological assertion - an intellectual proposition that matters very little in and of itself. But the New Testament teaches that the love of God gets expereinced by men in the context of human relationships: not in theological discussion, but in relationship. And it is to relationships that I would now turn our attention.

The most famous line from "Love Story" is "Love means never having to say

you're sorry." I've already suggested that it is both the best and the worst line in the book. Theoretically, it is the best. Theoretically, to love another is to accept him as he is: to encompass all his failures and weaknesses: to love him even when he is hurting me. That's the kind of love God has for us. But we are not God, and we are simply not capable of loving in that way.

It's interesting that in both instances when that line was used in the story someone had already said, "I'm sorry." Someone had already repented and confessed - and in the act of apology made possible a great affirmation about love.

I would suggest that "I'm sorry" just might by the two most important words we ever say to each other in love. Not that apology should become the only way we relate to each other - not that at all, for apology can be meaningless, and in a real sense an abdication of responsibility for one's behavior. But "I'm sorry" does indicate that I know my own humanness - I know the cost of the love giver - I know that I offend that love - that my own behavior builds a barrier against that love. The psychologists tell us that marital fidelity is never a product of rules that must not be broken - but the result of a trusting, honest love, that cannot be broken without breaking one's own heart. Love means - always saying I'm sorry - whenever I have misueed or violated the most precious gift a person has to give - his love. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?" God's love is expressed in forgiveness: God's forgiveness is experienced as we forgive and are forgiven.

I'm prepared to state my belief today, in a way I would not have just a few years ago, that we don't ever experience God's love for us as individuals, until someone enables it. Apart from the miraculous, of course: but in the everyday round the love of God remains a nice idea until it is felt and experienced in human relationships. Relationships that are honest and open encounters between people: relationships that are intimate and difficult to talk about in public: relationships that have so much integrity about them that they sometimes scane us away.

I learned a little bit about that earlier this week, and I'd like to share it - even though I know that it is impossible and sometimes unwise even to try. I attended a retreat with the other ministers of Crawfordsville Presbytery that brought all of us into a new dimension of relationship. Now, ministers are probably as threatened by each other as any other men alive. We play games with each other and are envious about each other - in the same way that other professional people do, but it's harder for us because we have to do it subtly: we're supposed to be above that sort of thing. Well, in the course of the retreat we were forced into small groups and forced to get honest with each other and things began to happen. In one group a man with heavy responsibilities for the life of the Presbytery, finally was moved to confess that he had great feelings of inadequacy: that he didn't feel accepted by the other men: that he generally wasn't feeling good about himself or the job he was doing. At the end of the group the leader asked us to give a verbal gift to each other. And all I could think of was to tell this man that he was a valuable human being - and that if I could I would give hime the gift of self esteem and self confidence. The others gave him similar gifts - and we all knew that we were really just making the love of God concrete. He was deeply moved - and he had tears in his eyes - and I believe a miracle happened. I believe - in this context of bed-rock honesty we were enabled to be the channels of God's love for this man.

That loses a lot in the telling and I won't dwell on it - except to say that it was healing and redeeming and liberating. And that when all is said and done it leads us to the greatest love story of all.

For the Good News of the Gospel is that the love of God can redeem and heal us where we are hurting most: that the love of God can be expressed openly between men and that the miracle of healing and reconciliation always results.

That's how the book, "Love Story", ends: with a broken relationship between father and son healed - as a result of a tragic death. And that's

what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about. Love - death - reconciliation.

Jesus said it plainly to his disciples: "I am the vine: you are the branches.

I love you, just as the father loves me. Remain in my love."

That's very good news. And it seems to me that it is the marching order for you and me in this church at this time.

Amen.

Father, we are more grateful for your love than we have words to tell. Help us to heal each other. Help us to love each other.

Amen.